

## The empire strikes back: a genre and register analysis of an interview with a nine-year-old child

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyze an interview with a nine-year-old child through the lens of the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) framework, as outlined in Suzanne Egging's *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics* (2004). The interview focuses on a movie the interviewee had just watched, *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*. While SFG encompasses a wide range of concepts, this article will concentrate on the analysis of Genre, Register, Transitivity, Mood, and Modality. Through this examination, it is possible to perceive choices and meaning the participants conveyed, which are shaped by the context of their interaction and the genre of movie review. This article offers insight into how social relations are constructed within such interactions.

**KEYWORDS:** Systemic Functional Grammar; Genre and Register; *The Empire Strikes Back*; *Kids Watch Classics*; Movie Review.

**Isabel Tomaselli Borba**

[isabeltomaselliborba@gmail.com](mailto:isabeltomaselliborba@gmail.com)

Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR),  
Curitiba, Paraná, Brasil.

**Juliane Polo Terres**

[juliane.terres@gmail.com](mailto:juliane.terres@gmail.com)

Universidade Tecnológica Federal do  
Paraná (UTFPR), Curitiba, Paraná, Brasil.

**Marta Botelho Lira**

[martinhabilira@gmail.com](mailto:martinhabilira@gmail.com)

Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR),  
Curitiba, Paraná, Brasil.

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to analyze a text through the lens of the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) framework, focusing specifically on Genre, Register, Transitivity, Mood, and Modality. The analysis is based on Suzanne Eggins' book: *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics* (2004). Although a myriad of concepts surrounds the area of SFG, this current analysis will restrain itself by only dealing with the aforementioned ones. The text under examination is an interview of a nine-year-old girl discussing a classic movie she had just watched, entitled *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*. The interview is part of a column named "Kids watch classics" and appears on the September 2016 edition of the British film magazine *Empire*. The column sets to interview different children every month about a classic movie that they had recently watched.

Eggins (2004) introduces the concept of Genre in the third chapter of her book by stating that every text is present in a context of culture that must be taken into consideration when one analyzes it. Each text fulfills a purpose of communication in this said context and those that do it in a clear manner – so as to be easily identifiable by native speakers – are regarded as unproblematic texts. For this reason, Genre is defined as the linguistic way with which this purpose is achieved (Martin, 1985b *apud* Eggins, 2004, p. 55). "Identifying the purpose of a text clues readers in to how to 'read' and therefore interpret the (sometimes indeterminate) meanings of the text." (Eggins, 2004, p. 55). In order for a text to belong to a specific genre, it must contain aspects that are intrinsic to all other texts in this given genre, so it is regarded as a social construct.

There are three basic dimensions that express the generic identity of a text and they are the Register configuration, the schematic structure, and the realizational patterns in the text. Register is one of the variables that dictates the genre that a certain text belongs to, as it discourses on the "context of situation" (Eggins, 2004) of the text. A study of the context of situation is relevant as it clears indeterminacies and ambiguity of texts by anchoring them to the situation in which they are present, concepts that however external still shape the text. Eggins makes clear what the constituents of Register that are crucial to discourse on an analysis are and what they account for. The first concept is "field", which reports the type of activity that these actors are engaging in. The second point is that of "tenor", which dictates the interaction and relationship between the actors involved. The final is "mode", which accounts for how language is being used in this interaction.

Responding to the situations on a practical level is the system of Transitivity, as it is the culmination of the contextual choices. Eggins (2004) states that as an expression of the Experiential meaning, Transitivity represents the participants' roles taken in the interaction, as in actor, process, and goal. These account for the process types themselves, the participant in the said process, and circumstances surrounding the said process, which are the components that are analyzed in this system. Firstly, there are six process types involved: material, following actions that take place in the tangible world.

Mental, which accounts for mind processes encompassing feelings and thoughts. Verbal, related to spoken actions such as speak, say, or tell. Relational, requiring at least two participants as it focuses on the attributes that are given to one by the other. Behavioral, psycho-physiological verbs such as breath or cry, bringing focus to the consciousness of it. Existential, preoccupied with the verb “to be” and the existence of something at a given moment.

On matters of the participants’ roles, Eggins presents the nominal groups that categorize this component. They are the goal, “at whom the process is directed, to whom the action is extended” (Eggins, 2004, p. 216), and the range, a more dependent participant, related to the process rather than the actor. Finally, Eggins brings the definition of circumstance. Being expressed by adverbs and prepositional phrases, this component englobes all other elements that have not been covered by the process or participant. “In selecting which process type to use, and what configuration of participants to express, participants are actively choosing to represent experience in a particular way.” (Eggins, 2004, p. 253).

As interaction is a primal basis for communication, language is structured in a way that reflects the ideas and meanings behind conversations. It is the purpose of the Mood and Modality analyses of language to map and track these interpersonal dimensions so one can identify the levels of intimacy, familiarity and solidarity the participants have, as presented by Eggins (2004). When a person initiates a conversation they do so by applying one of the four initiating speech functions, which are a result of the type of commodity one is exchanging together with the role one is performing during this exchange. The types are: offer, command, statement, and question (Eggins, 2004, p. 184). The response given by the other participant of the interaction can be either supportive or confrontative in regard to each one of the functions. “The Mood Structure of the clause refers to the organization of a set of functional constituents” (Eggins, 2004, p. 147), which ascribes to the choices used by the participants, as well as the implications of the decisions of speech.

Mood Structure is further divided into two components, Mood and Residue, the former the integral part of the clause from which one can denote the speaker’s position, and the latter the section whose omission would not comprise the speech. Each of these components is later subdivided into their own constituents. Mood is divided into subject, which according to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p. 117) is the person or thing “in whom is vested the success or failure of the proposition”; and finite, which is responsible for making the proposition definite. The constituents of Residue, although not as essential to the clause, are still affected by the choices of the clause. The constituents are: predicator, the verbal element of the clause; complement, a subjugated element that has the potential for becoming a subject should the clause be turned to the passive voice; and adjunct, which gives additional (but still non-essential) information. However, as far as Mood is concerned, linguistic interactions are not as clear and unambiguous, so it is left to analysis in Modality structures to express the hidden degrees of probability and usability or obligation and inclination. The label of Modality is also divided into two

primal aspects: modalization, and modulation. Modalization refers to the degree and judgement of usuality with which a piece of information is expressed as a proposition. Modulation, on the other hand, refers to the degree of obligation or of inclination that are attached to a proposal (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2004, p. 618).

## GENRE END REGISTER

The analyzed text belongs to the popular non-fiction genre, as it is the transcript of an interview in which the topic being discussed is a specific movie. We further categorize it as an interview as there is one participant making questions while another one answers them. The purpose of this text could be seen as gathering information about the interviewee's opinion on this classic and well praised movie. The relevance of this text or what makes it stand out to others is the fact that it presents a dissimilar purpose of other opinion interviews or reviews, which usually display the opinion and analysis of an expert in the area. This one, however, focuses on the opinion of a child, who has no prior experience or study on the matter of films, nor does she care that the movie is a classic, so she will not treat it with the unreachable criticism that a professional would. The text is sharing the innocent opinion of children and providing film enthusiasts that read the magazine with a child's perspective.

In terms of the specific context in which the text is present, one can regard it as a spoken text, even though we come in contact to it through reading it on the magazine, and although is known that written interviews are edited versions of the spoken ones, we will consider this a transcript based in the way in which the questions, answers and comments are collocated. We will also regard this as a pragmatically motivated interaction as the endpoint and structure of the questions are aiming at covering the opinion and perception of the interviewee of different plot points of the film as well as the behaviour or appeal of certain characters.

The schematic structure of the text, based on the lexico-grammatical choices and the stages, along with the purpose of each stage, are separated as follows.

### Stage 1

Title of the column: "Kids Watch Classics".

### Stage 2

Description of content (appeal): Big Films tackled by little people.

### Stage 3

Name and age of the interviewee: Ella Berry - 9.

### Stage 4

Title of the movie being reviewed: *The Empire Strikes Back*.

### **Stage 5**

General likes and dislikes about the movie:

***You have just seen *The Empire Strikes Back* for the first time. Did you like it?***

*I thought it was really cool. But without the music it wouldn't be as good. If there wasn't any music there'd just be loads of people rustling their jackets.*

***What was your favorite bit?***

*I liked the start when they were all trying to fix the big plane.*

***The Millennium Falcon.***

*Yeah, I liked that bit.*

***What didn't you like?***

*I didn't like the bit when they ripped the animal's stomach open and put Luke in it and there were guts everywhere. That was yuck.*

### **Stage 6**

Opinion on characters:

***Did you like Yoda?***

*Yeah, he's really funny. I liked that bit when he pretended not to be Yoda. He taught Luke to be patient and that he just needed to believe in himself, which is a really good message.*

***What about Darth Vader? Scary?***

*No! Well, he was when he killed people but he could be good. He just needs to learn how. He should go to see Yoda.*

***Did you know he was Luke's father?***

*Yeah, so that wasn't very surprising.*

***How did you feel about Han and Leia being in love? Did you like all the kissing?***

*That was like, yuck. I want Luke and Leia to get together.*

### **Stage 7**

Prospects and rating:

***Do you want to watch the next Star Wars movie?***

*There's another movie? Oh my God. I'd watch another one if it was a bit shorter.*

***What star rating would you give this?***

*Three stars.*

There is a significant point to consider in terms of field. The usual interview/review that is expected of a text such as this moves towards the technical end of the spectrum as the actors involved usually are experts on the area. However, as this specific text is an interview of a child that makes no use of taxonomies and relies solemnly on common knowledge and personal opinions to structure her answers, we will consider this as an everyday situation. On the matters of tenor, we are to consider that there is an unequal power relation on the fact that only the interviewer initiates new topics of conversation and makes questions, and the interviewee restrains from more than simply answering. Additionally, one could further argue for this inequality of power as the interviewee is a child, whereas the interviewer is an adult of unknown gender, so there is a certain hierarchy to follow. On the contact role, we can say that this is an infrequent situation, as they do not seem very close and this magazine's column depicts a different child talking about a different classic film each time. However, even though they are not close and the affective involvement may be classified as low, the interviewee seems to be comfortable enough around the interviewer to be honest in her opinions. The text presents more characteristics of an informal situation because of the language used. It is shown by the attitudinal lexis to express positive or negative opinions (e.g. *awful, it wasn't very surprising*), the use of slangs (e.g. *really cool, yuck*) and the absence of vocatives.

In terms of mode, some important topics must be acknowledged. When considering spacial/interpersonal distance, we can see that this is a casual conversation and that the feedback is immediate. In terms of Experiential distance, the language is used as a reflection as it is constituting the social process of expressing opinions (e.g. *I thought it was really cool*). As we have pointed out, even though we come across this text through a written format, we are considering it a transcription of a spoken dialogue and, for this reason, on the matter of nominalization, the sentences are short and the ideas are rarely dynamically related. The action processes are expressing opinions, likes and dislikes. The rhetorical organization, as well as the lexical density, once again follows the pattern of spoken discourse where verbs are not changed into nouns and present low intricacy due to the limited lexical expansion a nine-year-old is commonly capable of retaining. The questions provided by the interviewer seem to mimic her simple rhetoric, for instance, the lack of modals, perhaps for the reason that they do not wish to confuse the interviewee and intend on making her feel comfortable.

## TRANSITIVITY

1. *I thought it was really cool. But without the music it wouldn't be as good. If there wasn't any music there'd just be loads of people rustling their jackets.*

In the first sentence, the main verb is "thought", characterizing the process type as mental, in which "I" is the sensor and "it was really cool" is the phenomenon. In the second sentence, the main verb is "be", consequently, the process type is relational, "it" is the carrier, "as good" is the attribute, and "but without the music" is a circumstance of contingency. The third sentence begins with a circumstance of contingency "If there wasn't any music" that is followed

by an existential process “there’d just be”, in which “loads of people” is the existent, and it ends with a circumstance of manner “rustling their jackets”.

|                    |                  |                            |
|--------------------|------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>I</i>           | <i>thought</i>   | <i>it was really cool.</i> |
| Participant Sensor | Process - Mental | Phenomenon                 |

|                              |           |                      |                 |
|------------------------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------------|
| <i>But without the music</i> | <i>it</i> | <i>wouldn't be</i>   | <i>as good.</i> |
| Circumstance of Contingency  | Carrier   | Process - Relational | Attribute       |

|                                  |                        |                        |                                |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>If there wasn't any music</i> | <i>there'd just be</i> | <i>loads of people</i> | <i>rustling their jackets.</i> |
| Circumstance of Contingency      | Process - Existencial  | Existent               | Circumstance of Manner         |

### 2. *I liked the start when they were all trying to fix the big plane.*

In this second answer, the process type is considered as mental, in which “I” is the sensor and “the start” is the phenomenon. There is also a circumstance of location “when they were trying to fix the big plane”.

|          |                  |                  |  |
|----------|------------------|------------------|--|
| <i>I</i> | <i>liked</i>     | <i>the start</i> | <i>when they were all trying to fix the big plane.</i> |
| Sensor   | Process - Mental | Phenomenon       | Circumstance of Location                               |

### 3. *Yeah. I liked that bit.*

In this sentence, it can be seen that the process type is also mental, in which “I” is the sensor and “that bit” is the phenomenon.

|          |                  |                  |
|----------|------------------|------------------|
| <i>I</i> | <i>liked</i>     | <i>that bit.</i> |
| Sensor   | Process - Mental | Phenomenon       |

### 4. *I didn't like the bit when they ripped the animal's stomach open and put Luke in it and there were guts everywhere. That was yuck.*

In this specific answer, the mental process type occurs in the first clause, which is followed by a circumstance of location. However, in the last clause the process type is classified as relational, considering “That” as the carrier and

“yuck” as the attribute. Although the mental process type in the first clause is followed by a circumstance of location, this specific circumstance can be analyzed as a unit. Taking this into consideration, two material processes and one existential process are observed.

|          |                    |                |  |
|----------|--------------------|----------------|--|
| <i>I</i> | <i>didn't like</i> | <i>the bit</i> | <i>when they ripped the animal's stomach open and put Luke in it and there were guts everywhere.</i> |
| Sensor   | Process - Mental   | Phenomenon     | Circumstance of Location   |

|             |                      |              |
|-------------|----------------------|--------------|
| <i>That</i> | <i>was</i>           | <i>yuck.</i> |
| Carrier     | Process - Relational | Attribute    |

5. *Yeah, he's really funny. I liked that bit when he pretended not to be Yoda. He taught Luke to be patient and that he just needed to believe in himself, which is a really good message.*

In this case, a relational process type can be observed in the first clause, the carrier is “he” and the attribute would be “really funny”. The second sentence presents a mental process that begins with the sensor “I” and is followed by the phenomenon “that bit”. There is also a circumstance of location that includes “when he pretended not to be Yoda” and the third sentence. The last clause can be considered as a relational process, however the carrier is not present in the clause, only the value that is “a really good message”.

|                 |                      |                      |
|-----------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Yeah, he</i> | <i>'s</i>            | <i>really funny.</i> |
| Carrier         | Process - Relational | Attribute            |

|          |                  |                 |  |
|----------|------------------|-----------------|--|
| <i>I</i> | <i>liked</i>     | <i>that bit</i> | <i>when he pretended not to be Yoda. He taught Luke to be patient and that he just needed to believe in himself,</i> |
| Sensor   | Process - Mental | Phenomenon      | Circumstance of Location   |

|                     |                               |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>which is</i>     | <i>a really good message.</i> |
| Proces - Relational | Value                         |

6. *No! Well, he was when he killed people but he could be good. He just needs to learn how. He should go to see Yoda.*

In this particular piece of text, it can be observed that the first sentence is attributed with a relational process, which is interpreted and understood by the context and the circumstance. There is only the carrier “he” and the circumstance of location “when he killed people but he could be good”. In the second sentence the process type is considered material, given by the verb “needs”. The last sentence presents a material process by the verb “go”, of which the actor is “He” and the goal is “to see Yoda”.

|           |                      |  |
|-----------|----------------------|--|
| <i>He</i> | <i>was</i>           | <i>when he killed people but he could be good.</i> |
| Carrier   | Process - Relational | Circumstance of Location                           |

|           |                   |                      |
|-----------|-------------------|----------------------|
| <i>He</i> | <i>just needs</i> | <i>to learn how.</i> |
|           | Process - Mental  |                      |

|           |                    |                     |
|-----------|--------------------|---------------------|
| <i>He</i> | <i>should go</i>   | <i>to see Yoda.</i> |
| Actor     | Process - Material | Goal                |

7. *Yeah, so that wasn't very surprising.*

In this short sentence, the relational process is the only process type which is given by the word “wasn't”. The carrier would be “that” and the attribute would be “very surprising”.

|             |                      |                         |
|-------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>That</i> | <i>wasn't</i>        | <i>very surprising.</i> |
| Carrier     | Process - Relational | Attribute               |

8. *That was like, yuck. I want Luke and Leia to get together.*

This particular sentence presents in the first clause a relational process of which the carrier is “That” and the attribute is “yuck”. In the second sentence it can be noticed a mental process type as the main verb is “want”, therefore, the phenomenon would be “Luke and Leia to get together”.

|             |                      |              |              |
|-------------|----------------------|--------------|--------------|
| <i>That</i> | <i>was</i>           | <i>like,</i> | <i>yuck.</i> |
| Carrier     | Process - Relational |              | Attribute    |

|          |                  |                                       |
|----------|------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>I</i> | <i>want</i>      | <i>Luke and Leia to get together.</i> |
| Sensor   | Process - Mental | Phenomenon                            |

9. *There's another movie? Oh my God. I'd watch another one if it was a bit shorter.*

In this case, the first clause presents as a question, although its structure is made as an affirmative sentence, thus, there is an existential process type, and “another movie” is classified as the existent. In the second sentence, there is a material process followed by the goal and a circumstance of contingency, due to the presence of a condition given by “if”.

|                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>There's</i>        | <i>another movie?</i> |
| Process - Existential | Existent              |

|              |                    |                    |                                 |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>I'd</i>   | <i>watch</i>       | <i>another one</i> | <i>if it was a bit shorter.</i> |
| Actor /Modal | Process - Material | Goal               | Circumstance of Contingency     |

#### 10. *Three stars.*

In this last answer, there is no occurrence of a process type.

As one can conclude from the analysis, the great majority of the clauses involves a mental process. The reason for this can be related to the fact that the overall intention behind this interview, and the purpose of the magazine’s column, is to come in contact with the interviewee’s perception of the movie. The second most present process is relational, and one can further relate this to the idea that she narrates and expresses scenes she had seen to later express her opinion of it. Through dealing with Transitivity we come to the realization that the constituents assist us in perceiving how language represents the context the actors are present in, as in it the structure of the interviewee’s clauses reflect the idea of an interview/review.

### MOOD AND MODALITY

In matters of Modality, it is possible to notice that there is a low degree of modalization happening through the dialogue between the participants. As the interview has characteristics of an informal conversation, modals are not present in the interaction between the participants itself, however, it is used to talk about possible events in the movie *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* and to expose the interviewee’s opinion towards the movie. There are only eight occurrences of modals in the whole text (would, should, need, could), which can be seen by these examples: “*But without the music it wouldn’t be as good*”; “[...] *but he could be good. He just needs to learn how*”; “[...] *I’d watch another one if it was a bit shorter*”; and “*What star rating would you give this?*” (Ella Berry, 9).

One important element to be considered in this analysis is that the questions were made by an adult to a child. Thus, one could suggest that with the purpose of approaching the interviewee in a more friendly and casual way, most of the questions were made without modals, promoting a higher degree of interaction between interviewer and the interviewee.

In terms of the Mood structure, it can only be noticed the variance from interrogatives (questions) to statements (declaratives) sentences, which once again emphasizes the characteristics of an interview in which one participant makes questions and the other only answers them. The subject is often the interviewee or some of the characters the participants are talking about as shown in the example below.

| MOOD     |                            | RESIDUE           |  |
|----------|----------------------------|-------------------|--|
| <i>I</i> | <i>liked</i>               | <i>that start</i> | <i>when they were all trying to fix the big plane.</i> |
| Subject  | Predicator - Finite (past) | Complement        | Adjunct: Circumstantial                                |

Regarding the finite, even though the negative finite is recurrent, the finite indicating the past is the most used, as the participants are talking about events that happened in the past, as follows.

|            | MOOD       |            |             | RESIDUE                                  |
|------------|------------|------------|-------------|--|
| <i>How</i> | <i>did</i> | <i>you</i> | <i>feel</i> | <i>about Han and Leia being in love?</i> |
|            | Finite     | Subject    | Predicator  | Complement                               |

The adjuncts mentioned are mostly circumstantial, more specific about Time, by the fact that the interviewee was citing moments of the movie.

|                  | MOOD      |                     | RESIDUE                       |
|------------------|-----------|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>No! well,</i> | <i>He</i> | <i>was</i>          | <i>when he killed people.</i> |
|                  | Subject   | Predicator - Finite | Adjunct: Circumstantial       |

Finally, in what concerns the complements, there is a great variety of them with no specific type most recurrent.

| MOOD           |                            | RESIDUE          |
|----------------|----------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Yeah, I</i> | <i>liked</i>               | <i>that bit.</i> |
| Subject        | Predicator - Finite (past) | Complement       |

## CONCLUSION

We can conclude that in what refers to the analysis of Genre and Register, the interviewee expresses her opinion about the movie with no background information and experience in the review genre. This can be noticed due to the

fact that there is neither the use of taxonomies nor references from specific sources about the matter. Accordingly, it is possible to say that the review and perspective of the child is an innocent one, created by her own perception and observation. In addition, there is an unequal power relation between the participants of this analysis as the interviewer is an adult and the interviewee is a child, one being responsible for asking the questions while the other is limited to answer; however, although the relationship between the interviewer and the child is not close, it is perceptible that the girl feels comfortable enough around the interviewer to be honest about her thoughts.

In terms of Transitivity, the mental process is the most common process present in the interaction. The reason for this can be related to the fact that the overall intention behind this interview, and the purpose of the magazine's column, is to come in contact with the child's perception of the movie. The second most present process is relational, and one can further relate this to the idea that the child narrates and expresses scenes she had seen to later express her opinion of it. Through dealing with Transitivity, we come to the realization that the constituents assist us in perceiving how language represents the context the actors are present in, as well as the structures of their clauses reflect the idea of an interview/review. Finally, the analysis of Mood and Modality provides additional information about the interaction of the participants. We can perceive, referring to Mood, that it varies between question and statement, which reaffirms the characteristics of an interview.

Concerning the Modality, we have noticed a low degree of modalization, which characterizes an informal interaction and confirms the affirmation in the Genre and Register analysis that the interviewee was comfortable around the interviewer, even though there was no intimacy. It is through the analysis that one can confirm the choices and meaning that these participants meant to express during their interaction, giving us a view on how social relations take place.

## O império contra-ataca: análise de gênero e registro em um entrevista de uma criança de nove anos

### RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é analisar uma entrevista com uma criança de nove anos sob a ótica da Gramática Sistêmico-Funcional (GSF), conforme delineado por Suzanne Eggins em *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics* (2004). A entrevista tem como foco um filme que a entrevistada acabara de assistir: *Star Wars: O Império Contra-Ataca*. Embora a GSF abranja uma ampla gama de conceitos, este artigo se concentrará na análise de Gênero, Registro, Transitividade, Modo e Modalização. Por meio desse exame, é possível perceber as escolhas e os sentidos transmitidos pelos participantes, os quais são moldados pelo contexto da interação e pelo gênero da resenha cinematográfica. Este artigo oferece uma visão sobre como as relações sociais são construídas nesse tipo de interação.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Gramática Sistêmico-Funcional. Gênero e Registro. O Império Contra-Ataca. Crianças Assistem aos Clássicos. Resenha de Filme.

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